

The Night Journey Study Guide

The Night Journey by Kathryn Lasky

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Plot Summary

A young girl learns the story of her ancestors' escape from Russia first hand in the book "The Night Journey" by Kathryn Lasky. Although Rache is charged with spending time with her great grandmother each day, her parents warn her not to talk to her about the older lady's past. Nana Sashie insists one day on telling Rache a story of danger, a story that piques Rache's interest. Rache ends up learning the story of her past, as well as forming a deep bond with her great grandmother.

Relationships between children and the older generations, as well as the importance of one's past are two significant themes that emerge in the novel. Nana Sashie tells Rache she is beginning to forget her past and the things she's lived through. This forgetfulness scares her. She entrusts her great granddaughter with the story of her family's liberation from Russia, a story that Rache doubts even her parents know. Several years after Nana Sashie's death, Rache writes down the story, as it appears in this novel.

Sashie's family lived in Russia during the time of the persecution of the Jews. Because Sashie's father had never been fully discharged from the tsar's army, the family lived in fear that he will be called back into service for a man who ordered the death and destruction of their fellow Jews. It is in order to keep him from having to serve, or refusing to serve and being killed, that the family made a plan to leave. Rache is surprised to learn that it was her great grandmother who came up with the idea for the family to escape under the cover of the Jewish Purim festival.

Also important in the novel is the family's samovar, an appliance for making tea that traveled with the family from Russia. Sashie's mother found creative uses for the parts of the samovar so that her husband would agree to let her take it with them. Later, Rache finds a piece of the samovar in a box of fabric scraps. As a surprise for the family, her father has the samovar refurbished and gives it to the family as a gift. As Nana Sashie and Rache look at the samovar for the first time, it is as if the past and present collide. Nana Sashie is reunited with a piece that holds sweet memories from her childhood while Rache sees, with her own eyes, this appliance she's heard so much about. Soon after telling her story to Rache, Nana Sashie dies. Her story lives on, however, because Rache hears it, then writes it down.



Chapters 1 and 2

Summary

Young Rache and her great grandmother develop a special bond as Nana Sashie tells the story of her role in her family's escape from Russia. Rache has always seen the tintype photo of the young Nana Sashie, but has never gotten any glimpses of the little girl in her elderly relative until Sashie begins telling the story. Rache learns to love the changes the story of the family's past brings to Nana Sashie's face as she talks about the family's dangerous journey. Prompted by her best friend, Rache writes down the story told her by Nana Sashie.

In Chapter 1, Rache tries to make conversation with her great-grandmother. She tries to follow the rules her parents have given her about what she can and can't do and say around the elderly Nana Sashie. She is not to talk about great-grandpa or play his records. She is not to give her candy. Rache can talk about school, the weather and her friends. She is surprised when Nana Sashie acknowledges how hard it must be for her to come up with things to talk about. Sashie tells her great-granddaughter that she is beginning to forget the things she has lived through, something that scares her. The old lady tries to share with Rache the story of her childhood as Rache tries desperately to change the subject. When Nana Sashie mentions that it was dangerous to be a Jew in Russia, the idea of danger gets Rache's attention. Even though Nana Sashie tries to turn the tables on Rache, telling her she'll be in trouble with her mother and father, Rache is hooked. Rache responds that she doesn't care and hates talking about school. Nana Sashie admits she hates hearing about it.

In Chapter 2, Nana Sashie tells Rache the Russians hated the Jews for no apparent specific reason. She adds that Rache's great-great-great-grandparents were murdered in their beds. Nana Sashie agrees to tell Rache the story of her family's escape from Russia, but Rache's mother calls Rache for her dentist appointment. Rache makes Nana Sashie promise not to die before she gets back.

Analysis

The basis for the story, both the novel and the story that Nana Sashie will tell, is laid out in these two chapters. It appears the novel will be structured as a story within a story as Nana Sashie tells Rache the story of her family's escape from Russia in between the busyness of Rache's life.

For most of her life, Rache has known Nana Sashie only as an elderly lady, unable to walk or move about on her own, who has spent her time rocking, wrapped up in a mound of blankets, afghans and shawls. It is in these first two chapters that Rache begins to learn that her great-grandmother has had an exciting life, much more interesting than her secret club and play tryouts. It is with changing relationship between



Rache and Nana Sashie that the theme of the importance of relationships between the older and younger generations begins. Even though she has been asked by her mother and father not to talk to Nana Sashie about her past, Rache is drawn into the story of her ancestors when her great-grandmother tells her that her great-great-great grandparents were murdered while in Russia. Rache is completely hooked on the story when Nana Sashie tells her that the family escaped from Russia.

There are three things of which to take note in this section. This first is Rache's reference to Nana Sashie's eyes. Eyes, particularly Nana Sashie's eyes, become an important theme in this novel. She describes them as being so faded it was hard to tell what color they had been. The other is Nana Sashie's reference to her request for her father to speak only Russian, and no Yiddish when he took her to the park to play. The final one is the reference to Nana Sashie's husband and the family's ban on playing his music.

Discussion Question 1

Why has Rache been asked by her parents not to talk to Nana Sashie about her past?

Discussion Question 2

Why were Rache's great-great-great grandparents killed?

Discussion Question 3

What is Nana Sashie's physical state at this point in the novel?

Vocabulary

countered, notion, intrigued, infuriated, evaporated, incredulous



Chapters 3 and 4

Summary

In Chapter 3, Rache is impatient to begin hearing Nana Sashie's story. She curses when her mother and grandmother make her wait while doing breathing exercises with Nana Sashie. When the three women turn to Rache in surprise after her outburst, she notices the similarities between them. She is sent to her room as a punishment. When her father comes to talk to her later, she asks about the murder of her ancestors. He talks to her about the Russian holocaust, describing the way in which the Jews became abstractions to governmental leaders, abstractions that were easy to kill. Instead of the Nazis and their concentration camps, the Russians would burn the towns and kill the people. He asks her not to talk to Nana Sashie about the holocaust. The following day, Rache resigns from her job as curtain puller with the school's play "Oklahoma!" She tells her teacher she wants more time to spend with her great grandmother.

In Chapter 4, Nana Sashie recalls how her father was angry because he was afraid he would be called up to fight for the Russians. Rache watches as her Nana's face transforms into the one of the little girl in the tintype photo she'd seen all her life. Rache has never really believed Nana Sashie had existed as that little girl until she watches the transformation in her great-grandmother as she tells the story of how she came up with the idea for the family's escape plan.

Nana remembers the family sitting around the samovar drinking tea and trying to come up with a plan that would work. Her grandfather, Zayde Sol, wanted them to wait until after he died, which he believed would happen soon. Ghisa wanted to contact some radicals she knew to have them set up an escape plan, but Joe, her brother, refused to work with that type of people. Sashie took her mother's idea that they should act as if they were out on a casual stroll and turned it over and over in her head. She was sure there were people out there who would help them, but believed it will be people who are desperate themselves, not Ghisa's radical friends or rich people.

Analysis

In this section the reader learns the family's reason for wanting to leave Russia. The family was Jewish. Joe, Sashie's father, had served in the Russian army, but had never been completely discharged. He was still in danger of being called up to fight for the country. However, the same leaders of the country are those who have persecuted and killed the Jews. Joe's conscious would not allow him to fight for these people, but if he had been called up again, he would have no choice. For this reason, they decided to leave. Note Sashie's remark that Russia was a country that wanted to kill you or have you kill for it. As Rache begins learning her family's past, the theme of the importance of learning one's past begins.



Also in this section of the novel, the family members begin kicking around ways they can get out of the country without calling attention to themselves. Ghisa, Sashie's aunt, suggests they call upon her radical friends to help them put together a plan. Joe discourages this idea saying he will not work with the radicals. Although Sashie's mother's plan never seems to catch hold with any of the other family members, Sashie sees possibility. Her mother has suggested they go out casually, as if they are going for a Sunday stroll.

Interesting in this section is the attention that Rache pays to the faces of those around her. For instance, when she says a curse word in her frustration, she notices the similarities between the faces of her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. She wonders if these same similarities exist in her face and in the face of her murdered great-great-great grandmother. Also notice Rache's interest in the transformation that takes place in her great-grandmother when she begins to tell her story. Although her body is the same, Rache begins to see glimpses of the little girl that Nana Sashie once was. For the first time, Rache sees the connection between the old lady in the rocker and the young girl in the tintype photo that has been displayed on their mantel.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Sashie and her family decide to leave Russia?

Discussion Question 2

What were living conditions like for Sashie and her family in Russia?

Discussion Question 3

How does Rache's father explain to her the reason for the Russian people's persecution of the Jews?

Vocabulary

interminable, unforeseen, unison, prematurely, seethed, cauldron, baffled, wracked, systematically, defiance, resign, imminently, botched, retort, corruptible



Chapters 5 and 6

Summary

In Chapter 5, Nana Sashie's story is interrupted when the other family members call Rache to help with the overflowing dishwasher. Ed removes the drain tube valve and gives it to Nana Sashie, who has been moved to the rocker in the kitchen, to work on. She calls for the toolbox. Rache watches as her hands fly over the compartments of the box then deftly work on the valve. She doesn't want to go to the phone when her best friend, with whom she is angry, calls. She agrees to help Amy with her singing part in the play then hangs up. Rache tells her parents she has to cut out parts for cowboy vests for "Oklahoma!" Nana Sashie mentions that the idea of costumes always makes her think of the Jewish holiday of Purim. Rache offers to cut out the costume parts in Nana Sashie's room to keep her company.

Later that night Nana Sashie tells Rache it was during a family quarrel about Purim that she finally got the idea about how they could escape. She had been in bed, embarrassed and angry with herself for asking about Purim costumes. The question had gotten her scolded by her aunt and referred to as a "little girl." She got up from bed and went to her family to tell them they could escape by leaving their home on a particular day in the Jewish month of Adar, the time period of the Purim festival, and that they must go as Purim players.

In Chapter 6, Ghisa pointed out a problem in Sashie's plan. She warned the family they will look strange if they leave three days early for a Purim celebration just down the road. Joe defended Sashie's plan, stating there are solutions to that problem. It was Ghisa who came up with the idea that they should leave their hometown of Nikolayev under cover, not putting on their Purim costumes until they are within a day's travel of the border of the country. Much to the dismay of his family, Joe warned them they must travel light. Ghisa was charged with making their costumes reversible, plain clothes on one side with the costumes on the other. Sashie suggested they would need a wagon, an idea that Ghisa found ludicrous. Joe realized she was right. Sashie suggested there must be someone who was really desperate who can help them. Joe promised to think on it.

Analysis

In Chapters 5 and 6 the family's plan to escape began coming together. Indeed, it was Sashie who came up with the initial idea to camouflage the family's escape under the guise of going to a Purim festival. Purim is a Jewish festival in which the Jews dress up and play out the story of Queen Ester. Sashie had taken her mother's idea that the family would pretend to be out for a leisurely stroll when they leave. Sashie realized the family's act of traveling to another town would not be conspicuous if they were to go dressed as if they were attending a Purim festival.



Contrary to her habit of fault finding, it was Ghisa who filled in some of the blanks in Sashie's plan. She was the one who suggests they should leave their hometown under cover. Ida filled in the idea their Purim costumes should be reversible, looking like plain clothes on one side, Ghisa was to make the costumes. It was Sashie who told her father they would need a horse and wagon in order to escape successfully.

Note the development of Ghisa's character in these chapters. She was an old maid who seems to have been the naysayer of the family. She appeared to pride herself on picking other people's ideas to bits to prove they wouldn't work. It is clear that Sashie was frustrated with Ghisa when Ghisa first pointed out that there was a problem with Sashie's plan. She described Ghisa's "but" like a pig plopping in the mud. For those familiar with pigs, these animals are usually most happy when they have a cool mud puddle to lie in. For this reason, the pig plopping sound was a sound of contentment from Ghisa as Sashie believed she was about to tear apart her plan, a pastime that Ghisa apparently enjoyed.

Interesting was Ghisa's remark about being able to easily hide a chicken. Chickens will become significant as the book progresses. Notice also the family's dismay when Joe told them they must pack lightly. He reminded them in a way that was humorous that the idea was to get the members of their family across the border, not to "set up housekeeping on it."

Notice Joe's distress when Sashie asked him if he knew someone who was desperate enough to loan them a wagon for them to use in their escape. It was indicated that he turned away from his family, as if he didn't want them to see his face. Sashie had apparently made him think of someone who could loan them a wagon, but for some reason, he was upset about the idea of asking that person.

Also of note in this chapter is the introduction of the toolbox. As the toolbox was owned by Sashie's father, the story of the toolbox is important in the theme of the importance of one's past as it is part of Sashie's past, and hence, Rache's past. On the lid of the old box, there is an inscription in Cyrillic. Despite her age, Nana Sashie moves around quickly and efficiently in the box. She knows right away what needs to be done to the dishwasher valve in order to get it working again. It is apparent she is not only emotionally attached to the box, but has also worked with the tools inside on multiple occasions. Despite her arthritis, Sashie has found ways of using the tools, like propping and bracing her arms against the arms of the rocker, that allow her to be productive.

Discussion Question 1

What were the problems with Sashie's idea of escaping under the guise of being Purim players? How did the family work to get around these problems?



Discussion Question 2

What was the relationship between Sashie and Ghisa? Use examples from the book to support your opinion.

Discussion Question 3

Research the holiday of Purim. How does the story of the Jews' salvation at that point in time parallel that of Sashie and her family? How are the stories different?

Vocabulary

contortionist, corroded, veering, deftly, translucent, transformation, villainous, imbecile, burnished, subtlety, quell, inscrutable, prophetic, pronouncement, inscrutable, pronouncement, deliberation



Chapters 7 and 8

Summary

In Chapter 7, Wolf Levinson, a man who worked with Joe at the factory, avoided contact with others. Rumor associated him with the Jewish villages of Vishnagova and Vesnatefka that were obliterated by the Russians. One woman who accidentally came in contact with Wolf fainted when she saw him. She told others the reason she fainted was because of the terror she saw in his eyes.

Joe realized he was the desperate one, not Wolf, but went to the furnace room to talk to him anyway. He told Wolf that his family had to leave Russia in order for them to survive as a family. He pleaded for help to find a wagon on which they could leave town as well as a contact at the border. It seemed that when Joe made a joke as he looked at Wolf that he'd seen prettier faces that he broke the ice with the man. In the final paragraph of this chapter when Joe arrived home, he got a glass of liquor instead of a glass of tea as was his custom.

In Chapter 8, Wolf directed Joe to hold a dustpan for him as he whispered the arrangements he had made for the family to escape. He was to deliver a wagonful of chickens in which Joe and his family could hide in the space underneath the chicken coops. They would travel that way to Stepinova where they would get a regular wagon. Wolf had also arranged for a sentry to meet them at the border who would allow them to cross in exchange for gold. Joe wondered how the family will be able to conceal enough gold on them to buy their way across. He planned to meet them in an alleyway near their home at 2 a.m. on the eleventh day of Adar. When Joe told his family of the plan, Ida was disgusted by the idea they must go with chickens.

Analysis

Wolf Levinson was an anomaly among his coworkers. He had done nothing to harm anyone, yet everyone seemed to be afraid of him. It appears that the look in his eyes scared others so badly. Wolf tried to stay away from others. In fact, he told Joe that he lived in the furnace room of the factory, a room in which Joe became uncomfortably warm after just being there a few minutes. There were rumors that Wolf was among one of the few survivors of two Jewish villages destroyed by the Russians. He had worked at the factory since Joe was only a child. Joe described the man's face and the look in his eyes as being like that seen in an animal or person killed and fossilized by some natural disaster. Wolf, however, was not dead. Joe figured, however, that he was among the living dead. It was only after Joe made a joke about Wolf's appearance that Wolf seemed to warm to him and consider finding a way to help the family. Wolf's eyes, along with Nana Sashie's eyes, are part of the developing theme of eyes.



Note the way that Wolf took precautions in covering up his discussion with Joe about the details of their escape. Even though they are in the furnace room, a room in which few employees ever venture, Wolf stoked up the furnace so that its roar would cover the noise of his speech. He then gave Joe a dustpan to hold so his act of whispering to Joe would look natural and not suspicious.

Although Joe was happy that Wolf had agreed to help them get out of Russia, his family members were not as happy with the arrangements that were made. For the first day, they would ride in a wagon hidden beneath chicken coops. Any wastes from the chickens would fall into the area in which the family members were lying. Ida, who was known for being an immaculate housekeeper, was particularly offended by the idea of going with the chickens. It was interesting that after Ghisa's big speech about being able to easily hide chickens, they would instead be hidden by chickens.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss Joe's conversation with Wolf. Why was he so scared of the man?

Discussion Question 2

What type of man was Wolf? What had he been through in his life?

Discussion Question 3

Consider the precautions that Wolf took when telling Joe about the plans he had made for them to escape. What does this signify about him?

Vocabulary

explicitly, epitaph, cataclysmic, prattled, goad, convert, immaculate



Chapters 9 and 10

Summary

In Chapter 9, Rache thinks her friend's rendition of the song "I Can't Say No" with the gestures and gyrations she adds is gross. Rache doesn't give her opinion, but after Amy finishes, she contends it is indeed gross. Rache advises the song is fixable but Amy complains that she was given the part as a confidence booster and that she isn't capable of doing it. Amy changes the subject, asking Rache what she's been so busy with and Rache tells her about the story that her Nana Sashie telling her. Amy suggests to Rache that she write the story down, agreeing that it is more important than the play on which they are working. Amy begins a tirade of why school is not important but Rache stops her, suggesting that she be herself while singing the part and not someone else. Amy tries again and the song is better.

In Chapter 10, Rache believes she is having trouble getting her great grandmother on track with her story, as Nana Sashie talks about the hamantaschen, the traditional cookies made for Purim. However, Rachel realizes she is indeed telling more of the story when Nana Sashie says it was in the cookies that they hid the gold, her mother's idea. The family made two batches of the cookies — one with a piece of gold baked inside and the other with the traditional fruit filling. As they baked, they discussed which characters they would dress as and reminded each other of the roles of each character in the Purim story.

Analysis

Notice in this section of chapters the maturity that Rache shows as she helps Amy with her part in the school play "Oklahoma!" Rache's act of helping her friend is especially mature on her part as Amy was given the role for which Rache had auditioned. As Rache watches her friend rehearse, she realizes how bad her rendition is. She tries not to be negative, however, suggesting that Amy try to play the role more as she would play it instead of the way in which another person might play it. She encourages Amy to leave out the gestures and cutesy pie things she's trying to incorporate as they make her look silly. This idea of playing a role, however, is one of the minor themes in the novel. More will be said about this theme in a later section of the novel.

In this section of the novel, it is learned that it was Sashie's mother who came up with the idea to hide the gold in their Purim cookies. The family must take gold with them in order to pay for the services of the man who will help them cross the border out of Russia. Joe had worried about how they would hide this heavy and bulky method of payment. His wife, however, came up with a clever solution to the problem.



Discussion Question 1

Consider Amy's claim that the adults at school, particularly the school counselor with multiple divorces, is not worthy of leading children? How do some leaders leave much to be desired? How should this discrepancy be handled?

Discussion Question 2

How does Rache help Amy with her part in the school play? What does Rache's willingness to help Amy say about her?

Discussion Question 3

Consider Sashie's family and their choice of Purim roles. What did their choice of role say about each of them?

Vocabulary

gesticulating, lexicon, contours, perceptive, osteopath, loathsome, juxtapositions, mesmerized, exasperating, ingenious, commiserated, embellished, pungent, errant



Chapters 11 and 12

Summary

In Chapter 11, Rache has enlisted her mom's help in sewing a costume for Amy. Her mother doesn't think she can do anything with the clothing pieces the school has sent home so she sends Rache to the basement for some gingham material she has in one of the remnant boxes. While digging in the boxes, Rache finds a strange metal object she doesn't recognize. She takes it, along with the fabric upstairs to her parents. Her Nana Rose recognizes it, but can't bring to mind what it is. Rache finally guesses it is part of a samovar but can't get her parents to tell her how it worked or what part is missing. She is frustrated that they don't know about something so important to their family. Nana Rose admits she doesn't know how it worked, but warns Rache not to ask Nana Sashie about it as it would upset the older lady.

In Chapter 12, Rache has set her alarm for 2 in the morning. She sneaks downstairs to get the piece she has found to the samovar. She takes it to Nana Sashie's room where the old lady wakes quickly. She is glad Rache has come to talk to her. Rache puts the samovar piece in her hands and Nana Sashie recognizes it immediately. For the next three hours, Nana Sashie tells Rache the story of how the samovar came to be in America.

Joe, Ida and Ghisa argued about what items they should take with them. Ida and Ghisa are worried about food but Joe thought practically. He convinced them they need the toolbox in case of any mechanical emergency with the wagon. Ida agreed, as there might also be a need for Joe to have tools in order to get a job once they reached their destination. They decided each person could take one item with them, but it should be no bigger than a full-grown roaster. Ida wanted to take the samovar but Joe argued it was too big while Ghisa said the idea was ridiculous. Ida suggested the top piece could be used as her crown as Queen Esther and that the Purim cookies could be packed in it. The other pieces could be used as face shields while the family was hiding under the chickens, she argued. Joe agrees, as it seemed it would make the trip more bearable for Ida.

Meanwhile, Sashie wondered what she would take with her. She had a doll, named Tovah, and a wagon she had made for her doll. She had even sanded all of the pieces herself. She also had a counting book that Ghisa had made for her with pictures of Nikolayev made with fabric and ribbons. At the conclusion of the chapter, she had still not made up her mind what she should take.

Analysis

In these chapters, an important part of the family's history resurfaces. Rache's grandmother has talked about the samovar before but it is this part of the novel that this



appliance becomes an important theme in the novel as the piece becomes part of Rache's life. Rache finds part of the samovar, apparently the part that her great-great grandmother wore as her crown while she was dressed as Queen Esther, in a box of fabric remnants. The boxes are some that have come from Nana Rose's house. Rache can't figure out what she's looking at when she first uncovers the samovar piece. When she shows it to the other members of her family and they begin batting back and forth ideas what it might be, Rache quickly puts together it is part of the samovar that Nana Sashie has talked to her about in her stories. Rache is frustrated with her family members because this part of the family's history was so important that they smuggled it out of Russia when they escaped, despite Joe's warning they weren't packing to set up housekeeping, yet her Nana Rose, just a generation removed, doesn't know what the device is or what it was used for.

The author highlights the importance of the samovar as Rache remembers the times that Nana Sashie has mentioned it in her stories. As a child, Nana Sashie could see the samovar from her bed in the family's two-room apartment. She remembered pretending that it was a sentry, a soldier, watching over them in the night. As Rache watches her grandmother and mother scratching their heads over the piece, she suddenly realizes how Nana Sashie must feel with a full life of family history and no one to share it with. The older women warn Rache severely not to mention the discovery of the samovar piece to Nana Sashie, but Rache has her own plans.

In the middle of the night, Rache collects the samovar piece from the basement and takes it to Nana Sashie. Despite her fear Nana Sashie would be disoriented in the middle of the night, her great grandmother is actually very clear and ready to talk. Even in the dark, Nana Sashie recognizes the samovar and sets to telling Rache the story of how it came from Russia with them.

Ghisa's comment about being able to hide a chicken once again comes back to haunt her as Joe told the family they could take only one personal item with each of them but that it must be no bigger than a chicken. Despite the fact the appliance was described as being as big as three chickens stacked on top of one another, Ida said she wanted to take the samovar with her. As she was quite an intelligent woman, Ida went about describing how the samovar could be disassembled and used for various different purposes during their travels. She suggested the decorative top part could serve as her crown when she played Queen Esther, while the Purim cookies could be packed in the bowl of the samovar. She argued other parts of the samovar could be used as face shields from chicken droppings while the family was hiding out under the chickens. Joe decided to let his wife take the samovar along because she had been so diligent in finding uses for it. He also knew having this favorite family appliance with them would soften the blow of riding with chickens for Ida. For this reason, the fact that the samovar made the trip to America from Russia was a testament to Ida's intelligence.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss why the samovar was so important to Sashie and her family.



Discussion Question 2

Consider Rache's frustration with her family when they have trouble putting a name to the object that Rache has found in the basement. Why is she so frustrated with them?

Discussion Question 3

Consider Sashie's struggle when it came to deciding what to take with her. If you were in Sashie's shoes, which item might you choose?

Vocabulary

suffice, inscrutable, perplexed, remnant, jibing, contraptions, allusions, sentry, allusions, quaint, ironic, cacophony, digressions, petulant, rancor, indulgent, bourgeois, arabesque, cryptically



Chapters 13 and 14

Summary

In Chapter 13, on the day they were to leave, the family got up early and dressed in their costumes, turned on the plain side. They hide the objects they would take in their clothing. Part of the samovar was even disguised as a pacifier for baby Cecile. Outside, the fog was so thick they could not see one another. They formed a human chain as Joe felt his way along the walls to the spot where they were to meet Wolf.

In Chapter 14, Rache helps her father bake her mother's birthday cake, a replica of the Eiffel Tower. As the bake, they discuss architecture as well as Ed and Leah's honeymoon destination. In the living room before dinner is served, Nana Sashie asks Leah to open her presents. She gets a coupon for a exercise club from Rache and Nana Rose, and monogrammed handkerchiefs from Nana Sashie. Ed gives her a silver necklace. At dinner, the family tries to keep Nana Sashie from eating the tomatoes provencal, which they believe has too much garlic for her. She insists on eating two servings. The family hesitates when Nana Sashie mentions that she had once slept in a field of garlic. After dinner Ed surprises the entire family with a gift. He has found the missing pieces to the samovar, had it polished and reassembled. Nana Sashie seems pleased to see the samovar back in its original condition. Rache is glad the samovar is back together, but is afraid what she has been sharing with Nana Sashie will become public. Nana Sashie insists on having the samovar brought to her room and using it to make tea. She argues it will be easier for the family members to come to her room for tea than for her to go downstairs.

Analysis

In Chapter 13, Nana Sashie describes for Rache the activities of the day that the family left their home. They left quickly and quietly. Their clothing and packing arrangements had been thought out in advance for ease in carrying and maximum storage. Note that Ida had even fixed up a piece of the samovar as a pacifier for the smallest member of the family. Significant in this description is the author's use of the word "dissolved" to describe the way the family disappeared from their hometown. While she could have said they disappeared into the fog, this word choice would indicate that they could reappear as quickly and as easily as they disappeared. The use of the word "dissolved" indicates the way sugar dissolves into a glass of tea. The sugar cannot be readily distinguished from the tea and it would take some work to extract the sugar from the tea, it won't just reappear. The word choice indicates the family is gone for good, with no one but Wolf aware of when or where they went.

The present and the past collide when Ed presents the complete samovar to his family as a gift at Leah's birthday party. As Rache looks at the samovar snatches of conversation between Nana Sashie and herself come back to her. While the other



members of the family talk excitedly, Nana Sashie and Rache sit as “two small pockets of silence.” Nana Sashie is silent in her memories while Rache is silent in awe as something she’s heard so much about suddenly stands before her.

Despite her daughter’s discouragement, Nana Sashie insists that the samovar be brought to her room. A precious item from her childhood has been returned to her. Rache has mixed feelings, as she is afraid she will not have enough time left alone with her great-grandmother for her to finish telling the story. This is quite a change from a young lady who, at the beginning of the novel, had struggled with things to talk to her great-grandmothers about to one who is suddenly jealous of her time alone with the older lady.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the way Sashie and her family members hid the belongings they planed to take with them in their clothes. Why was this necessary?

Discussion Question 2

Think about the way that Rache and her father interact with one another. What characterizes their discussions?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Rache have conflicting feelings about the samovar? How does she think it will affect her relationship with Nana Sashie?

Vocabulary

brazenly, ebullient, precedents, scandalous, carcinogen, limerick, chromosomes, incendiary, futilely, reverie



Chapters 15 and 16

Summary

Chapter 15, when Rache steps into Nana Sashie's room at 2:30 the next morning she is surprised when she hears Nana's voice telling her she knew she'd come that night. Nana's story begins that night with Ida's repulsion when she first saw Wolf. Joe was afraid she would refuse to go. Sashie and Ghisa spread the bedclothes on the bottom of the wagon and family members began to settle in. It was not until Joe encouraged Ida to repeat a prayer with him that she relented and began to move toward the wagon.

When Wolf began to put the last coops on the wagon, Sashie began to panic. Her father instructed her to breathe slowly in through her mouth and out through her nose. Before they even got out of town, Wolf had to turn around and go a different route because of road construction. Sashie worked to try to keep the little boy, Louie, quiet. She had sugar sticks to feed him and her parents have also prepared a bottle with a light sleeping medicine in it if the boy got too active. They hoped not to have to use it.

As they passed through the town, a woman threw the contents of a slop pail, an indoor toilet, out the window. The waste material hit part of the chicken coops and wagon. When they heard the sounds of the river and Sashie knew they were leaving the city of Nikolayev. She tried to hear the road under the wagon wheels to keep up with where they were. Suddenly, Wolf slowed the horse and they heard him exclaim there was an imperial regiment coming their way. The soldiers tell Wolf they would take one or two coops of chickens for themselves. Wolf hollered for them to wait. Realizing he'd made a mistake, he referred to himself as a "Zhidi" a derogatory word for the Jews. He thought quickly and warned the soldiers that the coops were in bad repair and if they tried to carry them, they would fall apart. He suggested they take their chickens slaughtered.

Sashie was terrified as the blade of the soldier's sword poked among the coops, just inches from her throat. Wolf stopped the lieutenant, moving him toward chickens he believed would make a better meal. Wolf slaughtered ten of the chickens himself. None of the other family members are frightened by a blade, but blood dripped on the bedclothes. As night came, Sashie snuggled with her sleeping brother to share his warmth. Finally, Wolf stopped the wagon, declaring they had arrived. He removed the coops and helped each family member out. Sashie whirled and jumped in her new found freedom. She wandered to the edge of the forest, where Wolf was. She returned with a strange look on her face and told her family she had been surprised by a dead squirrel. Later, Wolf told them a man named Reuven would bring them a wagon in the morning. Joe thanked Wolf for being the family's Mordecai.

In Chapter 16, Sashie made a promise to herself that she would never forget after Wolf left. Rache questions what it was that she promised herself she wouldn't forget but gets a feeling that Nana Sashie doesn't tell her the whole answer. Rache fixes her Nana a glass of tea then the lady returns to her story.



In the morning, Reuven Bloom came bringing them soup and a wagon. Sashie described him as moving like a dancer, as if he were full of music. After asking Reuven if he was a firebrand, Sashie asked her aunt what a firebrand was. After Reuven served the family the soup, Sashie told the family she has decided Reuven was no firebrand but instead was full of music. He got his violin and played for them. As they drove away in the wagon, Sashie felt as if her path and Reuven's would cross again.

As the family rode that day, they had reversed their outfits to their Purim costumes. They drove through Chev where a baker gave them a bundle full of bread at no charge. In the forest Sashie, begged for her father to stop so she could get a piece of moss until he finally agreed. She'd never felt anything like it but when she tore a piece away from the ground, she changed her mind about keeping it and put it back.

Later, they meet another imperial guard. They were questioned about where they were going and why they were dressed as they were. The guards let them pass. They spent the night that night in a field of garlic. As they sat up camp, Sashie wandered, pleased with the space she had to move around in as well as the idea of being by herself. She was woken that night by the sounds of Ghisa crying. She missed her home and her friends. Sashie hoped to cheer Ghisa by showing her the counting book with the pictures of Nikolayev, the one made by Ghisa, that she had brought. Ghisa, in turn, showed Sashie that she brought the small tintype photo of Sashie with Ghisa and Mismatch, one of Ghisa's friends, at the park. Ghisa told Sashie that when she was old she would be able to show the picture and tell her grandchildren and great grandchildren that she was born in Nikolayev.

Analysis

These two chapters where Nana Sashie tells the majority of the story of her family's escape are the two longest chapters in the novel. Together, they make up about 25 percent of the book. In these chapters, Rache has again gone to her great grandmother's room in the middle of the night, giving them several hours to talk uninterrupted.

First, notice the reaction to Wolf. When Ida first saw him, she called him the devil and nearly refused to get into the wagon with him. Sashie also noticed the strange look in the man's eyes. In fact, she was so stunned when she first saw Wolf that she actually asked her father if Wolf was the man with whom they were going. She thought of a time when her father had showed her an old map of the world that included an area believed to be inhabited by dragons. Sashie had learned during her short life that the "dragons" of the world are not limited to one area of the world only. In fact, she believed the tsar of Russia to be one of these dragons. Sashie thought to herself that Wolf must have been burned by the fire of one of the dragons in order to have the look that he had. Notice at the end of their trip with Wolf, Joe called Wolf their Mordecai. The name was fitting as Mordecai was the one in the Purim story who got word to Queen Esther that her husband was planning to kill the Jews. It was through Mordecai that the Jews were saved.



One of the challenges faced by the family was keeping the two small children in the wagon quiet, especially during the time they were in villages and around people. Although they were hidden from sight below the chicken coops, a baby's cry would still be distinguishable and discernible above the clucking and clatter of the chickens. They needed to avoid calling any attention to the fact there was human cargo on the wagon as well as the chickens. In order to keep the oldest baby quiet, Sashie had packed in her clothing 15 sugar sticks. The idea was that the baby would eat the candy instead of crying and making noise. Sashie wound up having to feed him the sugar more quickly than she had anticipated so she scolded him for setting himself up to get rotten teeth. Sashie didn't understand when her mother prayed that Louie would live to be old enough to have rotten teeth. Sashie's lack of understanding her mother's prayer showed that she didn't really understand how much danger they were really in. If they were caught, they could be imprisoned or killed. Wolf also could be imprisoned or killed for helping them in their escape.

Notice the precautions that Wolf took in trying to keep the family not only hidden, but also safe. Of course, he stood to be punished if he was discovered helping Jews escape the country, but his concern for the family seemed to be much more than this. For instance, when the imperial soldier began poking his sword around in the chicken coops, Wolf quickly stopped him. Stopped him so quickly that he attracted suspicion from the soldier. Wolf was quick to think on his feet, though, and kept the soldiers from lifting off the coops by telling them they were not sturdy and would fall apart if lifted. He then stopped the soldier from trying to slaughter chickens himself by telling that soldier he would climb up and get some of the best, plumpest chickens for them because he thought so highly of their service. The family came away unscathed even though Sashie was badly scared because the soldier's sword point came close enough to her that her breath fogged the blade. She was able to see the cuff on the soldier's jacket as he wielded his sword up and down, trying to stab a chicken until Wolf stopped him. When Sashie later thought about her own experience, she thought about how much worse Wolf's must have been in order for him to bear the look that he did.

Although she didn't know it at the time, Sashie met the man she was to marry during the family's escape from Russia. He supplied them with the wagon that would carry them to the border of the country. He additionally brought and served them breakfast before they started their journey. Sashie recognized the music in the man's soul. When she mentioned it, he got out his violin and played it for the family. It is this man's music that Nana Sashie's daughter and grand daughter will not allow her to listen to as an elderly lady because they believe it makes her sad.

A final point of interest in this section is the revelation of the one thing that Sashie decided to take with her when they escaped. In an earlier chapter, she'd been in a quandary about what to take with her. She'd considered her doll, the wagon she'd made for her doll and a counting book that Ghisa had made for her. Since Sashie had looked back at the wagon on the day they'd left, it is known she'd decided against bringing that. However, what she did actually decide to take is not made clear until this point in the novel. As they slept in the field of garlic, Sashie was woken by the sound of Ghisa crying. She woke her aunt and asked what was wrong. It turned out that Ghisa was



missing the city and her friends there. At this point, Sashie brought out the counting book, telling Ghisa she can use it to remind her of the places she loved in Nikolayev. Although the relationship between the two seemed strained, at best, Ghisa was touched that Sashie chose this book as her one personal item. Ghisa had her own surprise for Sashie when she showed her the tintype photo of Sashie in the park, the item that she chose to bring. This was the same photo that now sits on the mantel in Rache's house. When Ghisa and Sashie talk about the photo on that night in Russia, Ghisa foreshadows that one day Sashie will have grandchildren and great grandchildren that she will tell about her life in Nikolayev.

Discussion Question 1

What precautions had the family taken to keep the babies quiet?

Discussion Question 2

What experiences did Sashie have during her family's escape that help her to understand what might happened to Wolf and how it had affected him.

Discussion Question 3

Why were the things that Ghisa and Sashie have brought with them during their escape significant?

Vocabulary

lambent, recoiled, disembodied, inexorable, emphatically, impassable, tumult, emanating, jovially, sabotaged, draught, resonance, obliterated, averted, imperial, regiment, conciliatory, succulent, ingratiating, confounding, unfathomable, dilated, fluent, confounding, lithe, transfixed, unabashedly, solitary, contours, conical, myriad, reluctant, botanical, expedition, retinue, miniscule

Chapters 17 and 18

Summary

In Chapter 17, the next day at lunch, Sashie wandered to a rock that allowed her to see out over the road. She spotted the same imperial guard they had met the day before headed their way. She ran to her family to tell them what she'd seen. Joe told them to switch their costumes to the plain sides and pretend like they were taking a family member to be buried. They pull off the charade and after the soldiers were out of earshot, they began to laugh. As they got closer to L'Bow, however, they saw and smelled smoke. Zayde Sol got upset and wanted to turn around, but Joe told him that was the only road. The disemboweled body of a cat was hung on the sign pointing to L'Bow. When Joe saw it, he ordered the children to lie down in the wagon. He told Ida to close her eyes, but she refused. Through the slats in the wagon, Sashie could see the bodies of dead animals, burnt homes and businesses, and parts of dead people. Joe sang the Kaddish, a song of mourning, so soulfully that Sashie had tears in her eyes.

Joe told the family that when they saw the Bug River again, they would know they were near their destination. Sashie was first to hear the water. They stopped for a moment to wash their hands in the cold river. Sashie even dipped her feet in. Before moving on, they all knew to change their outfits back to the costume side. Sashie wondered if the reality was found in the player side or the mourner side.

In Chapter 18, they arrived at the guardhouse and the sentry asked for the gold. Ida told him the gold pieces were baked into cookies. He asked for proof and she bit into one, revealing the gold. He asked her two more times before asking to choose a cookie himself. Ida showed him where the cookies with the gold in them, in the bottom layer. The man decided to take the cookies, as well as the samovar bowl in which they were packed. Sashie suggested he put some of the plain cookies on top of the ones with gold in them in case the other men in the sentry house want some. She rearranged the cookies quickly.

Analysis

The theme of playing a role comes up in this section of the novel. Playing a role has been mentioned before as Rache tried to coach Amy on her role for "Oklahoma!" When she tries to play the role as someone else might do, Amy's performance is gross and unbelievable. After Rache suggests her friend play the role from her own perspective, her performance improves. In this section, Sashie notes that in her family's number of role changes from the plain sides of their clothes to the costume sides of their clothes, she had lost track of who they really were. They have played the part of a happy family going to a Purim festival and a devastated family, going to bury a family member. In some ways, they are both the players and the mourners. Their celebration of Purim was real as they were learning first-hand the relief of being saved from their existence of



torture. On the other hand, however, their mourning was also real as they are leaving behind the only life they've known as a family. They've left behind friends, possessions, jobs and a certain amount of security to travel to a place where their future was unknown.

It was when the family met up with the same guards they had the day prior that they decided to pretend to be mourners, with Zayde Sol as the "deceased." Sashie was shocked they were able to pull off the feign but the soldiers didn't seem to recognize them at all. In fact the guards didn't even seem to realize the family was Jewish. They were afraid Zayde Sol might rise from the dead and throttle one of the soldiers when he made the sign of the cross, a type of Christian religious sign normally associated with Catholics, over the wagon. Zayde Sol behaved himself, however, and the family was allowed to pass.

Before they left Russia, Sashie experienced what the Russians had been doing to the Jews when their trip took them through L'Bow. The soldiers had joked with them the day before that if they were to take their Purim play to L'Bow there wouldn't be many spectators. It was not until they arrived in what was left of the town that they understand what the soldiers meant. The town had been burned and its people killed. Joe ordered Sashie to lie down in the wagon but she was still able to see enough of the destruction to get an idea what must have gone on there.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Sashie think that Zayde Sol might throttle the soldier who made the sign of the cross over their wagon?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Joe tell the children to lie down in the wagon when they enter L'Bow? Why did Ida refuse to close her eyes as he had requested?

Discussion Question 3

Consider the way the sentry treated the family. Do you think he really wanted to help the family, or just wanted the money? Compare and contrast his actions with those of Reuven.

Vocabulary

solitude, promontory, blanched, languidly, placid, diabolic, hypnotic, apocalypse, imbedded, vortex, sentry



Chapters 19, 20 and Epilogue

Summary

In Chapter 19, Sashie and her family joined her mother's family for a meal. They toasted with wine before eating the Purim cookies the family had brought with them from Russia. The family members were surprised to find they had with them the cookies with gold pieces in them. Sashie claimed not to know how the switch happened. Back in the present, Nana Sashie tells Rache she really doesn't know how they came to have the cookies with the gold in them. She tells her granddaughter she'd intended to take back only a few of the cookies with gold pieces but had gotten confused and by the time she was finished, she didn't know who had what. Ed comes to take Nana Sashie to dinner. When Rache asks her if that is the end of the story, she tells Rache it is only the beginning.

In Chapter 20, a few weeks later, Nana Sashie dies. When she started refusing to eat, her doctor tells the family to keep her comfortable, as she has decided to die. Family members sleep on a cot by her bed and play Reuven's music for her. One day she wakes up briefly, pats Rachel's hand, then closes her eyes and dies.

In the Epilogue, it is a long time after Nana Sashie's death before Rachel finally cries. The tears come during physical education class. She is supposed to go to the counselor's office, but instead goes to her father's office to talk. It is almost five years later, near her eighteenth birthday that she finally begins to get ready to write down Nana Sashie's story. On her birthday, she is given a letter written to her by Nana. In the letter Nana shares the secret held by Wolf that she learned the night after they'd ridden in his wagon all day under the chicken coops. A mother squirrel and her babies lie dead on the ground. Wolf looks at Sashie, saying only that the father squirrel ran away.

Analysis

Significant in this section of the novel is Nana Sashie's letter to Rache telling her about her experience with Wolf and the family of squirrels. It gives some insight into Wolf and his behavior. In the course of the novel, Sashie mentioned a dead squirrel the night they'd ridden under the chicken coops in Wolf's wagon all day. She had wandered to the edge of the woods where he had been standing and had seen him looking at dead squirrels. At that time she told her family she was disturbed because she had seen a dead squirrel. As she's telling Rache the story, the young girl had questioned her, sensing there was more to the story but Nana Sashie wouldn't tell her at that time. It is only in the letter from Nana Sashie that Rache gets on her eighteenth birthday that she learns the whole story.

When Sashie had wandered into the woods behind Wolf that night, he'd actually been looking at a mother squirrel and her babies. They were dead, with broken bones and



their heads bashed in. Significant is the lack of a father. Wolf told Sashie the father ran away. From the look in his eyes, Sashie gathered that Wolf's father, too, ran away. Instead of trying to protect his family or get them to safety, he had run, leaving them in danger. This could be why Wolf responded they way he did when Joe begged for the wagon on behalf of his family. Wolf told Joe he knew nothing of families. It could seem Wolf was only pointing out to Joe he didn't have a family, but in reality it could be that he'd never had a real family with a strong father leader. Joe's plea to Wolf would have touched him deeply, as it was Wolf's father's act of deserting his family that caused him such grief. When Sashie looked at Wolf the final time and vowed never to forget, she could have been thinking about how lucky she was to have a father that had stood up for his family and had done what needed to be done to get them all to safety even though it perhaps wasn't the easiest path he could have chosen.

Discussion Question 1

What does Sashie share with Rache about Wolf? Why is this revelation significant?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Sashie switched the cookies on purpose? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

The family allows Sashie to listen to Reuven's music during her last days of life. Why do they wait so long?

Vocabulary

elongated, judiciously, salvaging, cavernous, copious, incoherent, evaded



Characters

Rachel “Rache”

Rache is the daughter of Leah, the granddaughter of Nana Rose and the great-granddaughter of Nana Sashie. She is one of the major characters in the novel. It is to Rache that Nana Sashie chooses to tell the story of her family’s escape from Russia. During their time together, Rache and Nana Sashie develop a special bond, as Rache begins to understand that her elderly relative really was the young girl in the tintype photo displayed on the family’s mantle. It is Rache’s friend, Amy, who suggests to her that she write down the story that Nana Sashie is telling to her. During the course of the story, Rache helps Amy with her singing part in the school’s play “Oklahoma!” even though Amy got the part for which Rache had tried out.

Sashela “Nana Sashie” Bloom

Sashela Bloom, most often called Nana Sashie in the novel, is the central character in this story. She is the mother of Nana Rose, grandmother of Leah and great grandmother of Rache. She is quite elderly, and is plagued by diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure and arthritis. Rache describes how Nana Sashie spends most of her days sitting in a rocker either in her bedroom or in the family’s kitchen. She keeps herself wrapped in an assortment of blanket and shawls.

Even though her family members believe talking about her past makes Nana Sashie sad, Nana Sashie shares with Rache that is actually the fear of forgetting the stories of her past that makes the elderly woman sad. Over the course of several days, Nana Sashie tells Rache the story of her family’s escape from Russia when that country was persecuting Jews in the early 1900s. Interestingly, while Nana Sashie tells the story of her childhood, Rache notices her great-grandmother’s eyes get brighter, and her gestures and speech become more youthful.

Even though she was one of the younger members of her family, it was Sashie who came up with the basic idea the family used to escape from Russia. She suggested that in order to escape without calling attention to themselves, they must escape during the month of Adar and they must go as Purim players. It was also Sashie who suggested to her father that they needed a wagon in order to make their escape. She believed he could find someone who was desperate enough who would be able to help the family escape from the country. Later, Sashie switched up the Purim cookies the family gavesto the sentry guard who they paid to get them across the border. With her switch, Sashie gave her family some of the cookies with the gold pieces baked into them, payment for the samovar bowl the sentry stole from them.



Wolf Levinson

Wolf Levinson was a man who worked in the furnace room at Joe's plant. It was to Wolf that Joe went when he realized that his family would need a wagon to get safely out of their hometown. Most people are scared of wolf because of the terror they have seen in his eyes. When Ida first saw Wolf, she believed he was the devil. In reality, the look in Wolf's eyes was a remnant of the horror that he saw in the villages of Vishnagova and Vesnatefka. It was said that the Russian destruction of these villages was total with no survivors. Wolf, however, was said to have survived the destruction. Joe believed Wolf did not really survive, but was instead among the living dead.

Wolf was faithful in his promise to get Sashie and her family out of their hometown. He protected them from being discovered and killed by his quick thinking when their wagon crossed paths with an imperial regiment and those soldiers demand chickens. Later, after they arrived at their destination, Sashie followed Wolf into the woods where they saw a dead mother and baby squirrels. His remark to Sashie that the father ran away indicated that some of Wolf's trauma came from the fact that his father abandoned the family during the destruction of their village, leaving them to fend for themselves while he ran to safety.

Ida

Ida was Sashie's mother and Joe's wife. She was an immaculate housekeeper and for this reason was disgusted by the idea that the family must escape from Russia hidden underneath chicken coops. It was Ida who backed Joe's idea that they need to take along the family's toolbox as Joe might find work that would require him to have tools. It was also Ida who came up with the idea to bake the gold pieces into the traditional Purim cookies as a way of disguising the money. Ida was the one who found a way to use most of the samovar parts during the trip so she could take the family's beloved tea maker with them.

When Ida saw Wolf for the first time, however, she balked at riding in the wagon with him harder than she balked at the idea of the chickens. In fact, she called Wolf the devil and told Ed she wouldn't go with him. It was not until Ed began leading her in a prayer repetition that Ida got the courage to get on the wagon.

Nana Rose

Nana Rose is Nana Sashie's daughter, Leah's mother and Rache's grandmother. She is active in the care of Nana Sashie and voices her concern to her daughter that Rache is spending too much time with Nana Sashie. Though she tries to be authoritative when Rache finds the piece to the samovar, it is clear she doesn't know the use of the appliance, even though it was so important to her mother's family that they brought it from Russia when they escaped.



Ed

Ed is Rache's father and Leah's husband. He works as an architect. Ed is often disturbed because he believes his daughter does not know enough about history. It is her father that Rache first questions about the atrocities done to the Jews in Russia, her great-great-great grandparents in particular. Later, Ed is the one who arranges to have parts located to complete the samovar Rache finds in the family's basement. He presents the refurbished samovar to the family as a gift.

Joe

Joe was Sashie's father and Ida's husband. Although he was scared of the man, Joe worked up the courage to ask Wolf for help in getting his family out of Russia. When their escape was finished, he told Wolf that he was the family's Mordecai, or their savior. It was Joe who implicated the rule that each family member could take no more than one personal item, no larger than a full-grown rooster, with them when they escaped from Russia. Joe was a loving man with a good business mind but at the same time he had a quick sense of humor.

Ghisa

Ghisa was Sashie's unmarried aunt, her father's sister. Sashie was irritated by Ghisa as she came up with a variety of reasons why Sashie's plan to get the family out of Russia wouldn't work. The items that Ghisa and Sashie took from their home, however, showed that they did care for one another deeply. Sashie choose to take the counting book that Ghisa had made for her while Ghisa choose to take with her a tintype picture of Sashie.

Reuven Bloom

Reuven Bloom met Sashie and her family after they were dropped off by Wolf. He brought breakfast and a wagon to transport them to the Russian border. Sashie recognized the man had music in him. After she commend on this quality, he played his violin for them. Although Sashie didn't know how it would turn out, she suspected that Reuven would be part of her life later. The two met up again and were married. It is Reuven's music the family plays for Nana Sashie during her last days.

Leah

Leah is Rache's mother and Ed's wife. She is the daughter of Nana Rose and the granddaughter of Nana Sashie. She helps Rache put together a costume for her friend Amy's role in "Oklahoma!" Leah is the one who warns Rache most often not to talk to Nana Sashie about her past, her husband, and her childhood.



Louie and Cecile

Louie and Cecile were Sashie's younger siblings. They were just babies when the family escaped from Russia. Sashie remembered struggling to keep Louie quiet during their time in the wagon under the chicken coops. In case of emergency, the family had fixed bottles with a sleeping medicine mixed into the milk to make them sleep and keep them quiet.

Zayde Sol

Zayde Sol was Sashie's grandfather. He didn't believe he would live long enough to travel with the family out of Russia. He did survive until that day and even survived the trip. He played along with the Purim plan and even posed as a corpse at one point in the trip to help get the family past an imperial guard.

Amy Schwartz

Amy Schwartz is Rache's best friend. She is the one who recognizes the importance of the story that Nana Sashie is telling Rache and suggests to Rache that she write the story down.



Symbols and Symbolism

Two Silver Wine Cups

These two silver wine cups were the only things that Nana Sashie tells Rache her great-great-grandparents had of value. When the Russians killed this couple, they took these cups.

A Tintype Photo

This small tintype photo that shows Sashie and Ghisha together was the one thing that Ghisha choose to bring with her when the family fled from Russia. This photo is displayed on the mantle in Rache's family's home.

The Toolbox

This toolbox, which Nana Sashie and Ed still use, was one of the things that Sashie's family brought with them from Russia when they fled their home.

Purim

Purim is a Jewish celebration that commemorates the saving of the Jews from a plot by Haman, advisor of King Ahasuerus.

The Samovar

The samovar was an appliance used by Nana Sashie's family when she was a child. Parts of this samovar were snuck out with the family when they left Russia. Rache finds part of this tea-making machine in the family's cellar. Ed locates parts to complete the appliance and it is installed in Nana Sashie's room.

Horse and Wagon

Sashie's family realized they would need a horse and wagon in order to successfully escape.

Chicken Coops

The wagon in which Sashie and her family were transported from their hometown of Nikolayev carries chicken coops. The family members were hidden under these coops.



Vishnagova and Vesnatefka

Wolf Levinson was said to have survived the destruction of these towns, out of which there was said to have been no survivors.

Nana Sashie's Eyes

Rache's notes how Nana Sashie's eyes change and become more full of life when she tells the story of her family and their escape from Russia.

Hamantaschen

Hamantaschen are the cookies the Jews make for Purim. Sashie and her family baked gold pieces into their cookies as a way to hide the gold from anyone who might try to steal or take it from them.

Remnant Boxes

It is in one of these boxes that hold remnants of cloth that Rache finds one of the pieces of Nana Sashie's family's samovar.

Handmade Counting Book

It was this counting book, handmade for her by Ghisha, that Sashie choose to take with her when her family members left their home.

Zhidi

Zhidi was a derogatory name used to refer to Jews. Sashie was surprised when she heard Wolf Levinson refer to himself using this term.

Moss

Even though they were in a hurry, Sashie convinced her father to stop the wagon so she could feel moss for the first time.

Field of Garlic

During Leah's birthday dinner, Nana Sashie tells the family she once slept in a field of garlic. Rache later learns that it was the night before her great grandmother met her future husband that she and her family slept in that field.

The Squirrel Family

Sashie saw Wolf in the woods standing over this family of dead squirrels. He made the comment that while the mother and baby squirrels were killed, the father had run away, leaving them to fend for themselves. It can be gathered from this image that Wolf's father abandoned the family when their village was destroyed.



Settings

Apartment 23 of 64 Kreshchatik Street

A good deal of Nana Sashie's story takes place in this apartment in her family's hometown of Nikolayev. It was in this apartment that the family members planned their escape from the Russians.

Nana Sashie's Room

It is in Nana Sashie's room in Rache's home that Rache' learns the story of her family's escape from Russia. After Ed has the samovar put back together, it is put in Nana Sashie's room. Rache is afraid this addition means she will no longer have her solitary time with her great grandmother any longer.

The Cellar

The cellar is the part of Rache's house in which she finds part of Nana Sashie's samovar.

L'Bow

L'Bow was the town through which Sashie and her family drove on their way out of Russia. The people of the town were dead and all the buildings destroyed and burned.

Stepinova

Stepinova was the town to which Sashie and her family had to ride from their hometown of Nikolayev hidden in Wolf's wagon under the chicken coops.

Nikolayev

Nikolayev was the name of the town in which Nana Sashie was born and lived until she was nine. The town got its name from Tsar Nicholas II.



Themes and Motifs

The Samovar

The samovar is an important object in the novel not just because it was a central feature in Nana Sashie's stories, but also because it shows up again in Rache's life. The samovar was important enough to Sashie's mother that she found reasons to take the pieces of it with her when she left Russia. Years later, however, when Rache finds part of the samovar wrapped up in a box of fabric scraps, her family members don't seem to know what it is or what it is used for. Ed has the samovar restored, though, and it becomes part of Rache's story.

Although the samovar isn't really an important part of Nana Sashie's story until the family left Russia, there are references to it throughout the novel. Sashie describes the way she could see the samovar from her bedroom and believed it was a good soldier, there to stand watch over the family. She talks about how the family would spend its evenings drinking the tea that had brewed in the appliance all day. It was her father's habit to have a glass of tea as soon as he got home from work. Sashie said even the babies would drink tea from the samovar.

The samovar became significant when each family member was faced with deciding what one item he wanted to take when the family escaped from Russia. Ida decided on the samovar even though it is three times the size limit. She went about coming up with imaginative uses for it so that her husband would agree to take it along. The decorative top of the samovar was to be used as Ida's crown when she dressed as Queen Esther. The Purim cookies would be packed in the bowl of the samovar. Other parts, she argued, could be used as face shields when the family was riding under the chickens.

The samovar resurfaces when Rache discovers the decorative top part of it wrapped in fabric scraps in a box from her grandmother's house. Even though she's been warned not to, she takes it to Nana Sashie who recognizes it immediately. Later, without anyone knowing, Ed has the samovar piece restored and finds the other pieces to go with it so it works once more. Nana Sashie insists the samovar be kept in her room, a sweet memory of her childhood.

Relationship Between Children and Older Generations

A theme that runs throughout this novel is the relationship between children and those in the older generations. In this particular family, there are representatives of four generations. The interactions between these generations, particularly between the youngest and oldest, make up a major theme in the novel.

Although Rache has grown up looking at the tintype picture of the little girl that was her Nana Sashie in Russia, Rache had never really felt this child existed. All she's known of her great-grandmother is an elderly lady who must be carried from her chair to her bed.



Rache is ordered to spend time with her great grandmother, but has a list of do's and don'ts to follow during her time. It is when the two decide to break the rules that Rache really learns about who her great grandmother was and what she lived through.

Because Nana Sashie is sharing her story with Rache secretly, Rache can't tell her parents any of the things she's learning. When she has conversations with her father, and her father chides her for not knowing about ancient architecture, she wonders what he would think if he learned she knew more about the family's past than he did. Rache also seems to take a special enjoyment about playing dumb around her father and watching him react when she talks in teenager language or tells him that the Golden Arches are great architecture.

At one point in the novel, Rache's grandmother even becomes preoccupied with Rache's sudden desire to spend time with Nana Sashie. Rache has been tasked with cutting out costumes parts for her school's play and decides to cut them out in Nana Sashie's room. Nana Rose, her grandmother, wonders aloud why Rache is suddenly spending so much time in Nana Sashie's room and what the two are doing together.

Eyes

It is said that the eyes are the windows to one's soul. There are two characters in particular whose eyes are of focus in this story. One of these sets of eyes belongs to Nana Sashie. Rache describes changes in her great grandmother's eyes as she tells the story of her family's escape from Russia. Another set of eyes of importance in the novel were those of Wolf. Wolf's eyes were important because of the terror that remained in them after what he had seen done to the Jews.

When Rache talks about the changes in her great-grandmother when she talks about her childhood one of the things on which she focuses are the changes in her great grandmother's eyes. Before she begins her history lesson with Nana Sashie, Rache describes Sashie's eyes as being pale and washed out. She says it is hard to tell what color her eyes might have been as a child. When Nana Sashie begins talking about her family's escape, however, her eyes become brighter and the color deeper, almost as if they were the eyes of a child again.

While Nana Sashie's eyes are a source of interest for Rache, Wolf's eyes were a source of terror for those who saw them close up. Wolf was one who had survived the destruction of two Jewish villages by the Russians. Although he stayed to himself, he once accidentally ran into a new employee at the factory where he and Sashie's father works. After the employee recovered from her faint, she could only comment about how terrible Wolf's eyes were. Similarly, when Joe asked Wolf for a wagon to transport his family to safety, he found himself unable to hold eye contact with Wolf's terrible, terror-filled eyes.



Importance of One's Past

One of the major ideas that is stressed in this novel is the importance of one's past. The idea that one's past is important and should be preserved is the reason the book is written. When Rache learns her family's past, she becomes acquainted with a whole new side of her great-grandmother that she never knew existed before. In the same way, Nana Sashie is able to die in peace, knowing there is someone in the family who knows the things she saw and lived through.

Even though Rache has been warned not to talk to her Nana Sashie about the past, Rache is unable to stop her great-grandmother one afternoon. She piques Rache's interest with a promise of a story of murder and danger. The lady confides in Rache that she spends her days thinking about her past. She also tells Rache that she is scared because she is beginning to forget her family's history.

Although Rache had been warned not to talk to Nana Sashie about her childhood or her husband, she listens as the older lady tells her story. As she listens to Nana Sashie, the lady doesn't become sad as her family has warned her that she will. Instead, Rache begins to see glimpses of the little girl who Sashie once was. Her eyes grow brighter and she makes uncharacteristic gestures with her hands, helping Rache to understand that her great-grandmother didn't always spend her days in a rocking chair wrapped up in blankets and afghans.

Along with being therapeutic for Nana Sashie, Rache is also given a great history lesson about her own family's past. There are times when she becomes frustrated with her mother and grandmother because she knows more about the history of the family, for instance the samovar, than they do. Although this appliance was so important to Nana Sashie's family that they brought it with them when they escaped from Russia, Sashie's own daughter doesn't recognize the appliance and doesn't know for what it was used.

Players and Roles

A minor theme in the novel is the idea of playing roles. In both Rache's story and Sashie's story there are players and roles. In Rache's story, she works with Amy to improve her portrayal of Annie Ado in the school play. In Sashie's story, the family members pretended to be players in a Purim play so that they could escape from Russia. At one point, the young Sashie thought to herself that she wasn't sure of the difference between the pretend role and the real role any longer.

At the beginning of the novel, Rache has tried out for a role in a her school's production of "Oklahoma!" She doesn't get the part, it is instead given to her best friend, Amy. Rache is assigned the job of being the curtain puller, a job from which she resigns saying she wants to spend more time with her great-grandmother. Later, Rache works with Amy on her role in the play. Amy tries to play the role the way she envisions someone else might portray it. Her performance, in Rache's early teen vocabulary, in



“gross.” She suggests to Amy that she put more of herself into the role, playing it as she might. The result is better, Rache thinks. The idea is that when a person pretends to be something they aren’t, even for a play, it will come off as phony. There has to be some real emotion there.

When Sashie and her family escaped from Russia, they dressed as Purim players for part of their escape. These roles were familiar to the family. The story is one that is about the salvation of the Jews many years prior. In a way, even as they dressed as the characters that lived so many years ago, the family members were living out their own Purim story. When they cross paths with the same imperial guard members who saw them dressed as Purim players, Joe quickly decided they must act as mourners, going to bury their dead. Sashie was surprised how easily the family was able to pull off the feint. Consider, however, this family was dealing with real fear and mourning. Had they been recognized, they would have been imprisoned or killed. Even though they were escaping to a place they knew will offer them a better life, they were uprooting themselves from their home, friends and all that was familiar to them.



Styles

Point of View

This story is told from the third person point of view of an omniscient narrator with an emphasis on Rache. It is known that the character of Rache writes the story, years after her great-grandmother dies. Even with her first hand knowledge, however, the story is not written in the first person point of view. It is instead a third person narrator who tells both the frame story and Nana Sashie's story. The emphasis of the narration focuses on Rache as her thoughts and emotions are described through the novel while only the actions of the other characters are narrated.

As the novel spans nearly one hundred years, it seems it would make sense for some of it to be in present tense while some is written in past tense, but the author chooses to write in the past tense only. The changes between Rache's story and Nana Sashie's story are clearly marked with no sudden or jarring changes. It could be the author wanted to simplify the story by using only one tense, leaving the reader free to concentrate on the story instead of feeling as if he were being batted back and forth between the past and the present.

Language and Meaning

Again, even though the action of the novel travels back and forth between nearly 100 years, the use of language and its meaning is kept fairly stable throughout the novel. Although it is known from the counting book that Ghisa made for Sashie that Sashie and her family spoke Yiddish and Russian, there are very few Yiddish or Russian phrases used in the novel. The one time that a foreign word is mentioned specifically, is it the term "Zhidi" used by Wolf to criticize himself when he almost angered the imperial guard. While there is probably no English word that translates this disrespectful term for a Jew, it is included to help the reader understand just how frustrated and angry Wolf was at himself for misspeaking around the guard. Notice the text is also written in plain English with no attempts to include any accents. Since this novel is intended for young readers as well as adults, the lack of foreign words and phrases, and accents, makes the story very readable and easy to understand.

Structure

This novel is divided into 20 chapters with an introduction and an epilogue. The introduction gives the basis for the novel. It is based on a true story, a story that the author's aunt told her. The epilogue combines the conclusion of the story of Rache and Nana Sashie, and also gives a bit more information about the author's connection with the story she has told.

The chapters range in length from just less than a page to chapters that cover nearly ten percent of the book. Chapters 15 and 16, are two of the longest chapters in the novel. Together they take up nearly 20 percent of the book. These chapters tell the majority of Nana Sashie's story.

The novel is constructed as a story within a story, also called a frame story. Rache and her family's story in the present provides the frame around which Nana Sashie's story is told. The main action of the story takes place in the story told by Nana Sashie, so that story could actually be considered the main story line with the actions in the present being the subplot. Although the story is told from the idea of Nana Sashie telling it to Rache, the novel is actually written in more exposition than in dialogue. There is scattered dialogue, but this is used mostly in the parts of the story that appear in the present time. Dialogue is used sparingly in Nana Sashie's story, appearing only when characters speak directly to one another.



Quotes

But Rachel, I am so old that I am beginning to forget, and that scares me.
-- Nana Sashie (Chapter 1 paragraph 18)

Importance: Nana Sashie tells Rache that she wants to share the story of her childhood because she is beginning to forget. She doesn't want the story to be forgotten.

Just the way the Nazi holocaust happened. People — those in power, the so-called leaders — take a group of people, who because of their looks or practices or beliefs, appear slightly different from the majority. Anything different can be perceived as a threat. These leaders begin to think of the differences and not the things they have in common. Gradually they dehumanize these people, make them into abstractions. It's very easy to kill an abstraction. And your great-great-great-grandparents had become that to the Russian government.

-- Nana Sashie (Chapter 3 paragraph 22)

Importance: Nana Sashie tries to explain to Rache why the Russians decided to kill the Jewish people, like her own great-great-great grandparents.

It was she, Sashie, with all her nine-year-old darling and crazy ideas, who came up with the escape plan for her family that Russian spring of 1900.

-- Narrator (Chapter 4 paragraph 7)

Importance: Although the entire family tried to come up with some way for the family to sneak out of the country, it was Sashie who suggested they sneak out under the cover of the Purim celebration.

We must go on the fourteenth day of Adar," Sashie declared softly, "and we must go as Purim players.

-- Nana Sashie (Chapter 5 paragraph 68)

Importance: These are the words that Sashie used when describing to her family the way in which they needed to get out of the country.

Now the problem," he said, lifting one finger in a professional manner, "is how to appear to be going for a Purim celebration down the road, when we are actually traveling to the border, without arousing suspicion. Logically it seems impossible.

-- Ed (Chapter 6 paragraph 5)

Importance: Sashie was a little bit disturbed because the adults in her family kept finding problems with the plan she had concocted.

This made them almost unspeakable in their horror, unimaginable in their inhumanity. He thought about Wolf — the eyes, the eyes, Joe knew what the girl meant. Wolf was



no survivor. He was the living dead.
-- Narrator (Chapter 7 paragraph 3)

Importance: Although Wolf Levinson survived the atrocities done to the Jews in the cities of Vishnagova and Vesnatefka, the horror that Wolf had seen was reflected in his eyes.

You know, Rache, you should put this down. Write a story about it.
-- Amy (Chapter 9 paragraph 56)

Importance: Rache's friend, Amy, recognizes the importance of the story that Nana Sashie is telling Rache. It is she who suggests that Rache write it down.

It was such an uncharacteristic gesture for an old lady, but that's what Rache loved — the transformation, the odd juxtapositions, the slidings back and forth between the two realities: the young gestures with the old memories, the mysterious new light in the ancient irises, the adventurer disguised in shawls.

-- Narrator (Chapter 10 paragraph 1)

Importance: Rache enjoys seeing the way her great grandmother recovers some of her vitality when she tells the story of her childhood.

In their hands they held an object that had come eight thousand miles with their family from Nikolayev to Minnesota, and they had forgotten its name, its function, and how it worked.

-- Narrator (Chapter 11 paragraph 47)

Importance: Rache is frustrated with her family members because they do not recognize the samovar that has been such an important part of their family that they brought it with them when they fled from Russia. She recognizes that her family is in danger of losing the story of their past, their heritage.

It suddenly occurred to Sashie that after tomorrow nothing would ever be the same again.

-- Narrator (Chapter 12 paragraph 54)

Importance: The night before the family was to flee from their home, Sashie realized that her family's lives were about to change forever.

Linked together in a fragile chain of blind touch, the little family turned the corner and dissolved into the mist.

-- Narrator (Chapter 13 paragraph 6)

Importance: The night they fled from their hometown, it was so foggy that the members of Sashie's family must touch each other in order to stay together. The author's word choice in indicating the family "dissolves" into the mist gives their disappearance the feeling that they have completely disintegrated, never to be seen again.



Sashie had stared unblinkingly as Death sliced the air just inches from her face and throat. She was sure Wolf had seen something worse, but what was it? The haunted man contained a death riddle. Sashie had been brought to the edge, but Wolf in some way had crossed over.

-- Narrator (Chapter 15 paragraph 96)

Importance: As Sashie was deeply frightened by the soldier's blade slicing down just inches from her, she imagined how much worse Wolf must have seen to make him the man that he was.

Wolf," continued Joe, "you are no firebrand. You are our Mordecai!

-- Joe (Chapter 15 paragraph 122)

Importance: After Wolf Levinson got Sashie's family safely out of their hometown, her father told Wolf he was not a troublemaker but instead their "Mordecai" referring to the man in the Biblical account of the story of Ester who mostly responsible for helping end the death edict against the Jews.

And although their paths diverged now, she knew it was not always to be so.

-- Narrator (Chapter 16 paragraph 33)

Importance: Sashie sensed that she would see Reuven Bloom, the man who delivered the wagon that would take them out of Russia, again. Later, the two were married.

Sashie! You brought this! This is the thing no larger than a full-grown roaster that you chose to bring from home.

-- Ghisa (Chapter 16 paragraph 110)

Importance: Ghisa was surprised to see that Sashie had chosen to bring the counting book she made for her niece as the one thing she was allowed to bring from home.

For a brief moment Sashie wondered which side was the real one — player or mourner.

-- Narrator (Chapter 17 paragraph 18)

Importance: As the family members use their clothing to disguise themselves, Sashie began to wonder which one of faces they choose is real, if any of them were real. Were they happy because they were escaping injustice? Were they sad because they had been forced out of their home? Or did both instances apply?

They took turns sleeping in her room on a cot by her bed, and they brought up the record player and put on it the stirring music conducted or played or sometimes composed by Reuven Bloom, who had been Sashie's husband for forty years.

-- Narrator (Chapter 20 paragraph 2)

Importance: After so many years of not allowing Sashie to listen to her husband's music because they believed it made her sad, Rache's family finally realizes Nana

Sashie enjoys her memories even though they may make her sad. In her last days, they move a record player to her room so she can hear the music.